The Wayback Machine - https://web.archive.org/web/20200209054231/https://www.economist.com/china/2020/02/0...

Chaguan

China's rulers see the coronavirus as a chance to tighten their grip

Officials are playing politics with the viral outbreak

ASKED TO CRAFT a metaphor for all that the world admires and fears about modern China, a novelist could hardly improve on the coronavirus hospitals

now rising, at fantastic speeds, in disease-stricken cities. Start with admiration. These construction sites are a fine example of decisive Communist Party action. Work had been under way for two days when Chaguan visited the Second People's Hospital in Changde, a city in the central province of Hunan, 400km from the epidemic's suspected birthplace in Wuhan. Half a dozen excavators roared and

pawed at the rust-red ground. A road-roller flattened a gravel pad on which, by February 15th, a 200-bed fever hospital is due to stand.

Yet if China's resolve impresses outsiders, the dark side of one-party rule also stands exposed. Changde must prepare for the worst in part because the authorities in Wuhan and the surrounding province of Hubei, Hunan's neighbour, hid the virus's impact for weeks. A desire to earn trust and avoid Wuhan's fate probably explains why city-level propaganda officials in Changde—when this reporter was suddenly handed over to them by jumpy rural officials and police—granted unusual access to the new hospital.

ADVERTISEMENT

The construction site is overlooked by an ageing hospital block which, at the time of writing, houses 62 confirmed cases. The whole hospital, emptied of ordinary patients and ringed by guards and warning signs, will soon have room for between 370 and 850 patients, depending on how many need strict isolation. It will serve Changde's roughly 6m residents, who are divided between an urban centre and outlying rural counties. Officials say they hope not to need all the extra beds.

China's pop-up hospitals do not merely awe foreigners. They have become a staple of domestic propaganda, with state media pumping out tales of building workers and medics labouring to the point of collapse. For all that, when trying to assess how this crisis may affect the party, it is a mistake to focus narrowly on top-down actions. For the party is also bent on a task that is less familiar to outsiders but central to how China works at times of stress: mobilising the masses, nationwide.

Some techniques hark back to Mao's time. Grassroots party members are busy scolding and reporting neighbours who defy orders to stay indoors and avoid social

gatherings. In some regions village loudspeakers, which in the days of collective farms blared out slogans, patriotic songs and injunctions to work harder, have crackled back to life.

Public opinion is hard to gauge in authoritarian China. In Fuqingshan village, perched amid strawberry farms outside Changde, locals describe how they watch for anyone arriving from Hubei and generally "dissuade people from wandering around". Then their party secretary arrives on a moped to ban further interviews, declaring: "There is no infectious disease here." Elsewhere villagers, of their own volition, refer to virus-control as a battle in which all are enlisted: a "people's war", as the party now calls it.

ADVERTISEMENT

Until January the pole-mounted loudspeakers that loom over Chen Hongxia's home in Guanyin village were mostly quiet, broadcasting only a news bulletin each evening. Now they blare out hours of virus-control information from eight each morning. Ms Chen, 41, concedes that the "very noisy" broadcasts make it hard for her son, who is eight, to study at home. As she speaks, an amplified voice recites rules against hunting or selling wild animals for meat. A cancer patient for two years, wearing padded pink pyjamas on a brief foray outdoors, Ms Chen stands out for not wearing one of the face masks that all Chinese are meant to wear outside, though stocks are running low. "I can't find anywhere to buy a mask. But what should I do? I just stay at home," she explains, as her son scampers up to join her. Asked whether the state or the masses are responsible for beating the coronavirus, she answers: both. "China has a huge population. If you ask me who I should depend on, I think I need to depend on myself," she ventures. At the same time, she adds, the government has "a good understanding of the big picture, which individuals are incapable of".

Passing the buck to the grassroots

There are 99 party members in nearby Luluoping, a village of over 3,000 people. Guo Linlin is one of them. Locals are fearful, she admits, because "the situation is becoming more severe". Her work of reassurance includes watching 14 villagers who returned from jobs in Hubei during the recent lunar new year, who must remain

indoors, shun visitors and have their temperatures taken twice a day. This work leans on a "grid management" system which divides the village in two. Further subdivisions are monitored by officials and volunteers, some of them elderly folk in special red-and-gold disease-control armbands. A notice in the village listing new rules imposed by the local county, Taoyuan, concludes: "We invite the masses to supervise implementation."

Mass mobilisation has a dark history in China. Majoritarianism is a temptation in a big and quarrelsome country because of its power to unite people against a suspect minority. Shamefully, local officials have been tolerating prejudice and vigilantism against migrants with identity papers from Hubei, even if they have not been there for months (reports and online videos abound of Wuhan folk being barred from hotels or sealed in their own homes behind front doors blocked with metal poles or chains).

Blaming external foes is a temptation, too. Chinese diplomats and state media have eagerly accused America of unfairly barring travellers from China—though numerous countries have imposed similar restrictions. China's internet is full of conspiracy theories about the CIA creating the coronavirus to keep China down. It is tempting to shrug when Chinese officials play such politics. What really counts, surely, is building hospitals and saving lives? But to China's rulers, politics is never play. Every crisis is a chance to strengthen the party's grip. A virus is no exception. ■

This article appeared in the China section of the print edition under the headline "China's rulers see the coronavirus as a chance to tighten their grip"

Reuse this content

The Trust Project

More from China

Mourning for a medic

Li Wenliang's death is a new crisis for China's rulers

CHINA ›

Under observation

A weak health-care system complicates China's coronavirus battle

CHINA ›

Keep out

The coronavirus is fuelling tensions in protest-racked Hong Kong

Kong

CHINA ›

The best of our journalism, handpicked each day

Sign up to our free daily newsletter, The Economist today

→ **Sign up now**

Published since September 1843 to take part in *"a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress."*

Apps & media

The Economist apps

Economist Films

Podcasts

Other publications

1843 Magazine

The World in

The World If

The Economist

About

Advertise

Reprints

Press centre

The Economist Group

Economist Group

The Economist Store

Careers

Which MBA?

GMAT Tutor

GRE Tutor

Executive Jobs

Executive Education Navigator

Terms of Use Privacy Cookie Policy Manage Cookies Accessibility Modern Slavery Statement

Do Not Sell My Personal Information

Copyright © The Economist Newspaper Limited 2020. All rights reserved.